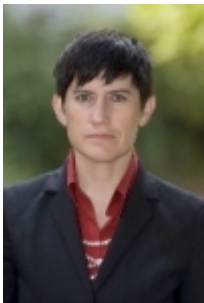




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Heather Cameron

Young Leaders Interview



Heather Cameron was born in London in 1969 and grew up in Vancouver. She studied Philosophy and History at the University of Toronto and did her MA and PhD in Social and Political Thought at York University titled "Foucault, Freud and the Fate of Critique". She is an Assistant Professor of Education at the Freie Universität Berlin and an Associate Professor Extraordinarius at the University of the Western Cape in South Africa. Her current research examines questions of social innovation and social entrepreneurship, quality management in social projects and the limits and opportunities of sport for social change projects especially in the form of leading to greater social and economic participation of girls and women. In 2005, Cameron started the project "Boxgirls" at her Berlin Kreuzberg boxing club to give girls and young women from disadvantaged neighbourhoods the chance to discover their strength and develop into leaders in their communities. The Boxgirls project grew internationally by adding sister projects in Nairobi (2007) and Cape Town (2009). Boxgirls has won the German Children and Youth Foundation, the Women Win Foundation and Comic Relief as partners.

Heather Cameron, how exactly do you define inclusive education?

The program on inclusive education at the Free University of Berlin generates knowledge about new forms of social integration. To this end, we examine successful measures of social integration and create innovative teaching and learning methodologies that enable students to solve problems with the aid of specific cases. The program in particular promotes the international exchange on these issues and thus generally contributes to the internationalization of the FU. One example is our

Your project “Boxgirls“ is an international success and has received numerous prizes and awards. Still, let me ask you a provocative question: Why should girls box? What about jazz dance or tennis?

Every sport is good. For one's body and spirit, for one's fitness and self-confidence. As for the special anti-violence aspect, combat sports and self-defense are particularly useful. If taught by competent coaches, they create a framework that is not limited to learning a few physical techniques. Power not only has to do with muscles. When you're boxing, you have to learn to deal with your limits. It is not just about physical fitness, but also about mental strength. You have to trust yourself and act tactically. Through boxing, you become more self-reliant, self-confident and develop leadership qualities. It prepares the girls to participate in society and assume responsibility. They participate in press appointments, project weeks in nearby schools, first aid courses and neighborhood events. Some even get their coaching licenses. Boxgirls provides the girls with a multitude of possibilities to make an active contribution to shaping their environment.

Jazz dance and tennis also provide development opportunities for girls (and boys) but do not offer the opportunity to challenge gender roles and discover their courage and overcome their fear. Fighting sports provide an opportunity for girls to discover talents they did not know they had or that they were perhaps told they could not have (courage, strength, heroism, determination), rather than accentuating gender stereotypes. Most important, though, is that everyone finds a type of physical activity that they enjoy and pursue it. Not everyone is cut out to be a boxer.

Where do you see Boxgirls in ten years' time? What partners and what kinds of support will you need in the future?

In ten years I would like to see Boxgirls as a strong professional organization able to provide a wide range of services to grassroots organizations in Germany and around the world. I imagine us as a gGmbH with an active board of social leaders from Germany and internationally who bring networks and know-how to me as the executive director and a strong team of women who provide curricula development, media support, income generation and fundraising skills, start-up help, consulting and international outreach activities to local Boxgirls organizations. We will need people to support us with their expertise and to invest in our projects. We will also need to partner with international companies and organizations to benefit from their networks in new locations, to learn about tax and legal issues, to meet key politicians, and to understand the risks and opportunities of different working environments.

In ten years I imagine we would have four or five countries represented in the Boxgirls network: Germany, Kenya, South Africa, maybe also another Northern nation like the UK or Canada, and another in the South – perhaps Brazil or Vietnam. I want these projects to be strong and self-sufficient, well-respected and able to attract volunteers and donations, as well as able to earn their basic program costs through linked social businesses. At the local level, we need regional and international partners to help with curriculum design, to help with small business growth, to provide political and media support.

Last year, you also founded a Boxgirls project in Cape Town/South Africa. What are the specific problems in South Africa and to what extent are sports projects in South Africa capable of

strengthening social cohesion?

In and around Cape Town, we confront two major problems: On the one hand, girls and women are permanently faced with the risk of potential sexual violence. On the other hand, economic resources in Cape Town are scarce, there are not enough jobs and those that do exist are for the most part so far away that women are not able to actively participate in their family lives. While the mothers take care of other women's children a day trip away, their own children grow up as "job orphans." Our focus here is on expanding entrepreneurship programs.

Like in Berlin, we can observe a strong segregation between different groups and classes. In Berlin, the gap between rich and poor is of course not as pronounced. But just as we see here in Germany, when we take a look at the socio-demographic information about university graduates, that there is not enough integration yet and that there is too little movement between educational levels, there are too few black women at universities in South Africa. In Berlin and Cape Town, we have partnered with universities that assist us in our programs and their academic evaluation.

Currently, you are looking at how to strengthen the position and the social and economic participation of girls and young women internationally through social entrepreneurship. What are the particular problems and solutions for women? What forms of innovative companies and projects do we need to empower women?

This is a complicated question that many of us are working on. Some parts are easy to answer: if women have the opportunity to earn and control their own money they have a different role in their family and community. A girl who earns her own money is more able to take decisions about who she goes out with, if she studies and when she starts a family than girls who are completely dependent on the men around them for even the smallest amount of money – for cell phone credit, bus fare, even sanitary products. Many development projects have also shown that investing in women's businesses tends to lead to more community development than investing in men – the women are apparently more aware of how they can share and grow with the community and not as a single individual. This is of course not always the case. In many places where Boxgirls works there are no "jobs" to be had, just opportunities which could be used to create a viable income stream for an individual and, with a bit of luck, a team of individuals. I am hoping to help some of the girls and women working with us to develop a sense for discovering good social business opportunities and to give them the skills as a team – not so much as individuals, as in a team you can have more talents represented – to exploit these opportunities, to create a basic living for themselves. It requires a new way of looking at problems and access to more know-how once the first basic steps have been taken. We are very glad then to work with foundations like Comic Relief and Women Win who invest in our developing guidelines for income generation for women and girls. I will be working intensively on this for the next year. I am sure I will have more to report.

In May 2010, you participated for the first time in a BMW Foundation forum. What did you take from the 3rd European Young Leaders Forum in Istanbul? What insights have you gained on the topic of "Social Cohesion"?

The opportunity to join other Young Leaders in Istanbul was wonderful. First of all, to be invited to

give a workshop makes you think hard about what problems you have as an organization that you can frame in a way to be able to get advice from very smart people from all over Europe who are unfamiliar with your project. This is a good exercise to try to see your organization from the outside, which is always important to do, but not done enough. Then the panels were amazing – to hear directly from Turkish ministers, TV personalities and leading professors and social activists gives you an insight about Turkey that I would not get otherwise, and since Boxgirls in Berlin is supported by many Turkish families I feel I understand more about them and my neighbors in Berlin. Concerning social cohesion, in addition to learning about how urban renewal can sometimes devastate communities despite the best of intentions I also learned that a very diverse group of young Europeans can actually be brought into productive dialogue through a commitment to social aims. We all came from very different backgrounds and had varying degrees of involvement with social projects but the visits and the workshops created a base from which we could all equally contribute.

Links

Boxgirls